Ahpra & National Boards

Position statement

9 March 2021

Registered health practitioners and students and COVID-19 vaccination

What you need to know

Vaccination is a crucial part of the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many registered health practitioners will have a vital role in COVID-19 vaccination programs and in educating the public about the importance and safety of COVID-19 vaccines to ensure high participation rates.

National Boards strongly encourage all registered health practitioners and students (particularly those undertaking placements in various practice settings) to have the full COVID-19 vaccination course as scheduled unless medically contraindicated.

National Boards expect registered health practitioners and students to:

1. be appropriately qualified and trained to administer COVID-19 vaccines if authorised, and
2. provide accurate information and advice about COVID-19 vaccination including in social media and advertising.

As health practitioners and students are members of the general community, vaccination will contribute to achieving the highest possible level of immunity across the community, will provide practitioners and students with a level of protection for their own health if exposed to the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

Introduction

The National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (the National Scheme) for Australian health practitioners commenced on 1 July 2010 under the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act* (the National Law) as in force in each state and territory.

The 15 National Health Practitioner Boards (National Boards) work in partnership with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) to protect the health and safety of the public.

National Boards have approved registration standards, codes and guidelines that together form part of the regulatory framework for each profession. These frameworks guide the professional practice of registered health practitioners in Australia.

This position statement states the National Boards' expectations of Australian registered health practitioners in regard to:

- being vaccinated against COVID-19,
- administering COVID-19 vaccines, and
- providing advice and information about COVID-19 vaccination.[1]

This position statement explains how the Boards' existing regulatory frameworks apply to COVID-19 vaccination. It should be read in conjunction with the standards, codes, guidelines, position statements and other guidance published by National Boards.

[1] COVID-19 is caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV 2.

This position statement is based on information available in March 2021. Information about COVID-19 and vaccination is still developing and this position statement will be regularly reviewed.

Practitioners should check the public health advice from Commonwealth, State and Territory Health Departments for the most recent information about COVID-19 and vaccination. Relevant links are included at the end of this position statement and published on the COVID-19 section of the Ahpra website.

National Boards' position on COVID-19 vaccination for registered health practitioners

Vaccination is a crucial part of the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many registered health practitioners will have a vital role in COVID-19 vaccination programs and in educating the public about the importance and safety of COVID-19 vaccines to ensure high participation rates.

Registered health practitioners who are trained, educated and competent in all aspects of vaccine management and administration and who are authorised under relevant drugs and poisons legislation can administer a COVID-19 vaccine.

Registered health practitioners who are authorised to administer COVID-19 vaccines will be required to complete additional training related to the handling and administration of the vaccines, including the Commonwealth Department of Health's COVID-19 vaccination training program.

Vaccination of health practitioners and students serves specific purposes, including:

- as health practitioners and students are members of the general community, vaccination will contribute to achieving the highest possible level of immunity across the community, and
- vaccination will provide practitioners and students with a level of protection in relation to their own health if exposed to the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 at work or elsewhere.

National Boards strongly encourage all registered health practitioners and students (particularly those undertaking placements in various practice settings) to have the full COVID-19 vaccination course as scheduled unless medically contraindicated.

This is consistent with the National Boards' expectations, as set out in the codes of conduct or their equivalent, that practitioners have a responsibility to participate in efforts to promote the health of communities and meet obligations with respect to disease prevention including vaccination, health screening and the reporting of notifiable diseases.[2]

Regardless of their own vaccination status, health practitioners must ensure that there are appropriate measures in place in their practice to manage any risk of transmission of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 to patients, colleagues and the community.

Administering and storing vaccines

All vaccines must be administered and stored in accordance with the relevant legislation, best practice, organisational requirements, vaccination program requirements and the guidelines and recommendations of the Australian Immunisation Handbook (the Handbook).[3] National Boards recognise the Handbook as providing current, evidence-based advice to health practitioners about the safe and effective use of vaccines and the public health benefits associated with vaccination. Health practitioners must also ensure that up to date and reputable sources of information are accessed to support the provision of advice and information about COVID-19 vaccines.

Conscientious objection

In the case of a conscientious objection about receiving, authorising, prescribing or administering COVID-19 vaccination, practitioners must inform their employer and/or other relevant colleagues

[2] In addition, section 11.2.4 of *Good medical practice*, states that good medical practice for medical practitioners involves making sure you are immunised against relevant communicable diseases.
[3] Commonwealth Department of Health (2020). *Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy*. See: https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/about-covid-19-vaccines/australias-covid-19-vaccination-policy

(where necessary) of their objection as soon as reasonably practical. For example, a practitioner's personal beliefs may form the basis of a conscientious objection to particular treatments.

In addition to the above, it is important that practitioners inform their patient or client of their conscientious objection where relevant to the patient or client's treatment or care. In informing their patient or client of a conscientious objection to COVID-19 vaccination, practitioners must be careful not to discourage their patient or client from seeking vaccination. Practitioners authorised to prescribe and/or administer the vaccine but who have a conscientious objection must ensure appropriate referral options are provided for vaccination.

While some health practitioners may have a conscientious objection to COVID-19 vaccination, all practitioners, including students on placement, must comply with local employer, health service or health department policies, procedures and guidelines relating to COVID-19 vaccination. Any queries about these should be directed towards the individual employer, health service, state or territory health department and/or education provider for registered students. National Boards regulate individual practitioners and not health services or state and territory health departments. Queries about COVID-19 vaccination programs should be directed to the Commonwealth, state and territory governments which are responsible for these programs.

COVID-19 vaccination information sharing and social media

National Boards expect all health practitioners to use their professional judgement and the best available evidence in practice. This includes when providing information to the public about public health issues such as COVID-19 and vaccination. When advocating for community and population health, health practitioners must also use their expertise and influence to protect and advance the health and wellbeing of individuals as well as communities and broader populations.

Any promotion of anti-vaccination statements or health advice which contradicts the best available scientific evidence or seeks to actively undermine the national immunisation campaign (including via social media) is not supported by National Boards and may be in breach of the codes of conduct and subject to investigation and possible regulatory action.

National Boards have developed social media guidance to help registered health practitioners understand and meet their obligations when using social media. The guidance explains that registered health practitioners must make sure that their social media activity is consistent with the regulatory framework for their profession and does not contradict or counter public health campaigns or messaging, such as the Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy.

Health practitioners are reminded that it is an offence under the National Law to advertise a regulated health service[4] (including via social media) in a way that is false, misleading or deceptive. Advertising that includes false, misleading or deceptive claims about COVID-19, including anti-vaccination material, may result in prosecution by Ahpra.

Concerns about the conduct or practice of a health practitioner can be reported to Ahpra via the Ahpra concerns submission portal. National Boards can consider whether the practitioner has breached their professional obligations and will treat these matters seriously and in accordance with established procedure.

More information

Additional guidance from National Boards

The Chiropractic Board of Australia's Statement on the provision of health information contains important information for chiropractors on vaccination and information sharing.

The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia's Position statement on nurses, midwives and vaccination provides important information for nurses and midwives on vaccination and information sharing.

[4] A regulated health service is a service provided by, or usually provided by, a health practitioner (as defined in the National Law).

National public health information about COVID-19 and vaccination

www.health.gov.au is the official site for the latest information on the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Information about national vaccination policy is available from: *Commonwealth Department of Health (2020). Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy*. See: www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/about-covid-19-vaccines/australias-covid-19-vaccination-policy.

Information about the COVID-19 vaccination training program is available on the Department of Health website. See: www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/covid-19-vaccination-training-program

The Therapeutic Goods Administration website provides valuable information on COVID-19 vaccines, including information about advertising COVID-19 vaccines. See: www.tga.gov.au/covid-19-vaccines.

State and Territory information on COVID-19 and vaccination:

Jurisdiction	Web link
Australian Capital Territory	www.covid19.act.gov.au/vaccine.
New South Wales	www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/covid-19/Pages/covid-vaccination.aspx
Northern Territory	coronavirus.nt.gov.au/
Queensland	www.health.qld.gov.au
South Australia	www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/conditions/infectious+diseases/covid-19/vaccine/covid-19+vaccinations
Tasmania	www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au/vaccination-information/covid-19-vaccination
Victoria	www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/vaccine
Western Australia	ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus/COVID19-vaccination-program

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